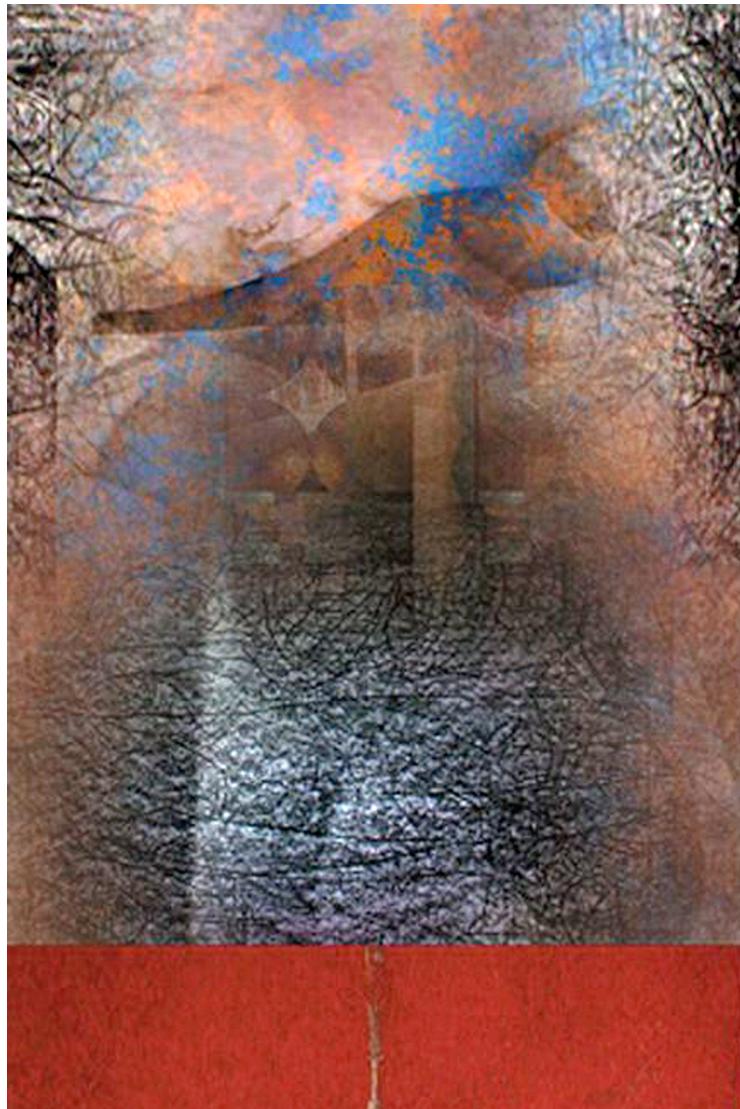


The unseen/seenness of becoming multiple

INTERALIA MAGAZINE August 2015

An online magazine dedicated to the interactions between the arts, sciences and consciousness
<http://www.interaliamag.org/articles/joseph-nechvatal-the-unseen-seenness-of-becoming-multiple/>



Joseph Nechvatal, *becoming multiple* (2007) 112 x 168 cm (44 x 66") computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas

In the beginning was the noise.

-Michele Serres, *The Parasite*

The idea of unseen/seenness re-opens the production of subjectivity in art by affirming the applicability of multiplicity. I will explore this issue using my computer-robotic assisted painting *becoming multiple* as example as it demonstrates aspects of *latent excess*. The idea of latent excess re-establishes an ambiguously private critical distance for the art viewer: a distance achieved through the connective disparity between pleasure and frustration.

I believe that my painting *becoming multiple* shows that an unseen/seen art is possible and even indispensable to us now by demonstrating what an art of *latent excess* might look like. For me, an unseen/seen art problematizes the pop simulacra and hence enlivens us to the privateness of the human condition in lieu of the fabulously constructed social spectacle that engulfs and (supposedly) controls us. This private unseen/seen separateness offers us a personal critical distance (gap), and thus another perspective on (and from) the given social simulacra.

Such an unseen/seen art of phantasmagorical latent excess might provide us with two essential aspects relevant to our lives. First, it can provide a private context in which to suitably understand our simulacra situation. Secondly (but more importantly) it may then undermine this understanding of the simulacra by overwhelming our immersion in the customary simulacra – along with our own prudent pose as observer and judge. Through the destructive-creative bacchanalia at the root of an art of unseen/seen latent excess, we are prodded to lose our position of detached observer. As such, *becoming multiple* demands our engaged intellectual and perceptual production.

For me, an unseen/seen art like *becoming multiple*, when latently excessive in its own right, is capable of functioning, paradoxically, by nurturing in us a sense of polysemic uniqueness and of individuality brought about through a counter-mannerist style of reproducibility (circuitous, excessive and décadent). It is a style that takes us from the state of the social to the state of the secret distinguishable *I*, by overloading ideological representation to a point where it becomes almost nonrepresentational. The psychic rhizome around *becoming multiple* is regularly swarming itself into being as micro and macro factors attract. One cannot declare in advance what its limiting confines are or where it will or will not operate, nor what may become connected and tangled up in the rhizome's multiple dimensions because the connections do not inevitably plait common types together.

This acknowledged probing at the outer limits of recognizable art representation, the excited all-over fullness and fervor of this syncretistic probe, isn't a failing of communications within the excessive terms of *becoming multiple* then; it is its subject.

II

I would like to next explain a bit of how *becoming multiple* functions as unseen/seen art, while simultaneously promoting the aesthetics of obscurity.

Recently in my book *Immersion Into Noise*¹ I mapped out a broad-spectrum of aesthetic activity I call the *art of noise* by tracing its past eruptions where figure/ground merge and flip the common emphasis to some extent. *Immersion Into Noise* concludes with a look at the figural aspect of this aesthetic lodged within the ground of consciousness itself.² For me, the obscurity of *becoming multiple* exemplifies well a general noise aesthetic needed now within our broad-spectrum data-monitoring environment of background machine-to-machine gigabyte communication³ in which we now find ourselves. *becoming multiple* is perhaps a good example of the speculative reality of noise aesthetics in our era of algorithmic globalization.

With the unseen/seen in mind, I became interested in a new contemporary aesthetic labor based in the unseeability of *becoming multiple*'s obscure affinity for disconnectedness - one that focuses on an impregnable commitment to a nihilistic aesthetic of *becoming imperceptible*.⁴ *becoming multiple* has an affinity with obscurity that takes you into embodied and embedded resonance perspectives, into radical immanence, and away from both pop imagery and pure abstraction. I am interested in an exquisite unseen/seen aesthetic for *becoming multiple* where personal anthropomorphic eccentricities and indiscretions are tolerated by combining the neo-materialist⁵ vibrant world with a wider vision of political

¹ Nechvatal, Joseph. *Immersion Into Noise*. Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press (2011)

² This involves a question of the qualities (and levels) of awareness of our own consciousness within aesthetic realms which we are capable of attaining through noise art. Nechvatal, Joseph. *Immersion Into Noise*. Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press (2011) p. 210

³ Stupendous amounts of data generated by nearly one billion people are set in motion each day as, with an innocuous click or tap, people download movies on iTunes, check credit card balances through Visa's Web site, send e-mail with files attached, buy products, post on Twitter or read newspapers and art theory papers online.

⁴ "Although all becomings are already molecular, including becoming woman, it must be said that all becomings begin with and pass through becoming-woman. It is the key to all the other becomings. [...] If becoming-woman is the first quantum, or molecular segment, with the becomings-animal that link up with it coming next, what are they all rushing toward? Without a doubt, toward *becoming-imperceptible*. The imperceptible is the immanent end of becoming, its cosmic formula. [...]" Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translation by Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press (1987) p. 279

⁵ Manuel DeLanda coined the term *neo-materialist* in a short 1996 text "The Geology of Morals, A Neo-Materialist Interpretation" where he treats a portion of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* in

awareness including private spiritual, ecstatic or numinous themes accessible through the generative subjective realm of each individual; an aesthetics of perception-politics based on resonance (not a politics of visibility) which reveals in minute particulars the full spectrum of the extensive social-political dimensions.

This unseen/seen affinity is a materialist nihilism of *no* that (if it goes far enough) can transform a metamorphosis (subject to the flickering formative forces of emergence)⁶ into an all-embracing *yes* of delicate unseen/seenness. So I am advocating with *becoming multiple* not the passive and thus incomplete nihilism of form, but a generative and virulent and curative nihilism that unleashes forces of unseen/seen reverberation to emerge and resonate like a web of inter-connected, molecular and viral relational affects and intensities that traffics in dissonance, deviation, and the incidental.

But what specifically can we glean for art from this instability and resonance of covert nihilism? In what kind of unseen/seen regimes of attraction/repulsion can the resonant nihilistic art object participate, and what may it do differently from other signs and objects?

To these questions I offer a theory of *à rebours*⁷ exchanges of figure/ground relationships: a nimble unseen/seen art that emphasizes human and non-human entanglements. This is an art that depends on playing out nihilistic negativity by intensifying its forces into an affirmative nihilism. This nimble nihilist bracketing pushes the audience towards open de-familiarizations, challenging them to think outside of the normal system of human consciousness. In this way it is unseen/seen aesthetically favorable.

With a nimble unseen/seen art of noise - based in the distinction between active nihilism and passive nihilism - we can depict the underground vigor of form as an activity that can only be speculated at by thinking beyond the discursive. And that enacts a shift away from subject-object dualism.

The embeddedness of our inner world - the life of our imagination with its intense drives, suspicions, fears, and loves - guides our intentions and actions in the political-economic world. Our inner world is the only true source of meaning and purpose we have and nimble unseen/seen exquisite gazing⁸ (that involves self-investigation) is the way to discover for ourselves this inner life. So we might consider now that, in contrast

order to conceptualize geological movements. For more on neo-materialist see Manuel DeLanda's interview in *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* by Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press (2012) p. 38

⁶ In philosophy, systems theory, science, and art, emergence is the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions. Emergence is central to the theories of integrative levels and of complex systems.

⁷ The meaning of *à rebours* is against the grain. Also, *À rebours* (1884) (translated as *Against Nature* or *Against the Grain*) is a decadent novel by the French writer Joris-Karl Huysmans. Its narrative concentrates on the tastes and inner life of Jean Des Esseintes, an eccentric, reclusive aesthete and antihero who loathes bourgeois society and tries to retreat into an ideal artistic world of his own creation.

⁸ *Gaze*; to look long and intently. *Gaze* is often indicative of wonder, fascination and revelation.

to our frenzied data market surveillance culture,⁹ that which trains us to fear the atrocious eyes of outer perception, a protracted and absorbing unseen/seen gazing at *becoming multiple* could encourage the development of agile clandestine exchanges based on the embedded individual intuitive eye. Of course this sphere of anti-purist unseen/seen gazing (essentially a cooperative rejection of the tyranny of labels, essential identities, privileged abstractions and fixed ideas) is what allows art to construct unstable distinctions between subjects and objects that embraces the entire spectrum of imaginary spaces; from the infinitude of actual forms to formless voids of virtuality. Subsequently my interest here is in anti-pure unseen/seen art that challenge and sometimes exchange the hierarchy of figure and ground (figure and abstraction) through struggles with noise.

The principle of constructing patterns of infinite becomings is perhaps inherent in avant-garde artistic tradition (avant-garde values). But this avant-garde now, I think, should be considered in terms of noisy invisibility not ontology, as deviating from the regularities of visible normality provides the avant-garde new sources for artistic production. Certainly, the values of the avant-garde have always been interfering with the channels of artistic production and reception - and these values are responsible for expanding the forms and definitions of art itself.¹⁰ But like in nature, noise in art plays a productive role in the invisible life of a system when it stresses becoming-imperceptible.

But a becoming-imperceptible-invisible unseen/seen art, today can no longer be a form of enfant terrible with-drawl, akin to Marcel Duchamp's strategic invisibility,¹¹ but rather a phantasmagorical plunge into what Félix Guattari expresses as the *chaosmosis*.¹² In that sense, *becoming multiple* marks a qualitative transformation into a non-place where being and non-being reverse into each other, unfolding out and

⁹ For example take the blandly named Utah Data Center, built for the National Security Agency. A project of immense secrecy, it is the final piece in a complex puzzle assembled over the past decade. Its purpose: to intercept, decipher, analyze, and store vast swaths of the world's communications as they zap down from satellites and zip through the underground and undersea cables of international, foreign, and domestic networks. Flowing through its servers and routers and stored in near-bottomless databases will be all forms of communication, including the complete contents of private emails, cell phone calls, and Google searches, as well as all sorts of personal data trails—parking receipts, travel itineraries, bookstore purchases, and other digital transactions. It is, in some measure, the realization of the “total information awareness” program created during the first term of the Bush administration—an effort that was killed by Congress in 2003 after it caused an outcry over its potential for invading Americans’ privacy. For more on this trend see James Bamford’s book *The Shadow Factory: the Ultra-Secret NSA from 9/11 to the Eavesdropping on America*. Anchor (2009)

¹⁰ For more on this read my essay *Viractivity in the Webbed Digital Age* that was published in *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* Online #5 25th Anniversary Edition (2011) <http://writing.upenn.edu/pepc/meaning/05/meaning-online-5.html#nechvatal>

¹¹ Duchamp's entire artistic activity since the "definitive incompleteness" of the *Large Glass* in 1923 was an exercise in strategic invisibility, giving rise to objects and events which--because they were apparently too impermanent or unimportant or insubstantial, or because they eluded established genre conventions, or because they confused or diluted authorial identity--evaded recognition as "works of art."

¹² Félix Guattari said in his noteworthy book, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, the work of art, for those who use it, is an activity of unframing, of rupturing sense, of baroque proliferation or extreme impoverishment that leads to a recreation and a reinvention of the subject itself.

enfolding in their respective outsides. This short-circuit causes a creative conflagration typical of the unseen/seen art of noise.

Let's consider the difference between unseen/seen art (based on an individual's inner vision) verses the monstrous mass machine data market,¹³ with its digital functionalism. For me the difference is in looking *into* and projecting *onto* something - thereby discovering an emerging manifestation based in invisibility - as opposed to looking *at* something. In that sense it requires an active slow participation on the part of the viewer - and unseen/seen style demands as much. For me this requires use of hidden mental participation and, as such, is now essential in our climate of monstrous mass media (mass-think) in that it plays against the grain of given objective consensus visibility.

However, my main interest in unseen/seen invisibility lay in a texture of emerging claims of art-as-politics, with its emphasis on the production of individuality based in a political physiology (a political function of living systems) with a strong proposition of emergence as the key aspect.

III

Noise nourishes a new order.

-Michele Serres, *The Parasite*

Now I would like to look more specifically at the possibility of further developments in unseen/seen art aesthetics concerning where becoming-imperceptible and becoming-perceptible nimbly interact. As sketched out in my book *Immersion Into Noise*, the evolution of visual noise art develops from certain prehistoric cave areas and baroque grottoes, to certain levels of mannerist and counter-mannerist complexity, to noisy spatial renderings in various exuberant architectural styles, then into cubism, futurism, dada, fluxus and other 20th century avant-garde movements, into the screech of technological noise art, and into the softness of software noise art aesthetics.

As noted above, what is important in unseen/seen aesthetics is its intentional and elongated invisibility and enigma. That is why this subject is so hard to write about. The very topic is a very difficult one to pin down and make intelligible for good reason. The art of unseen/seen is an art of disbelief in habitual codes of practice and understanding.

¹³ To support all that digital activity, there are now more than three million data centers of widely varying sizes worldwide, according to figures from the International Data Corporation.

So unseen/seen art is not a set of homogeneous practices, but a complex field converging around perceived weaknesses in the art system. Such a noisy hyper-cognitive stance happens when the particular of electronic connectivity is seen as part of an accrual total system by virtue of its being connected to everything else - while remaining dissonant. Noise unseen/seen aesthetics is a complex and ambiguous political gazing, and its theory of an art of resistance and investigation would be increasingly valuable to an analytical social movement based on skepticism while undermining market predictabilities, as it strengthens unique personal powers of imagination and critical thinking. This is so as it counters the effects of our age of simplification: effects which have resulted from the glut of consumer oriented entertainment messages and political propaganda which the monstrous mass media feeds us daily in the interests of corporate profit and governmental psychological manipulations.

The unseen/seen art aesthetic functions as a way of seeing that reverses the order of figure/ground¹⁴ to ground/figure. *becoming multiple* collapses being into a state of non-being ontological implosion. It creates ambivalent aleatory¹⁵ processes that are true to our inner essential world: dynamic pools of expansion and disintegration.

The art of unseen/seen noise is that screech amid the collapse and extension of aesthetics connected to immanence and transcendence (where art is in the process of becoming-imperceptible-perceptible) facing the merging of figure into environment and environment into figure. We can find moments of this screech of collapse-extension in contemporary complexity theory and in some areas of information technology, nano-technology, cognitive science, and biotechnology. These moments of collapse-extension accompany the contemporary development where the static image has become dynamically engaged with the human imagination and personal choices of the viewer. In some cases literally, engaging the participation of the viewer (who becomes what I have elsewhere renamed as the *viewpant*)¹⁶ to the point of physical interactivity. In other cases they are engaged conceptually (or post-conceptually) by looking long and hard at the art. I believe that the forms of this aesthetic post-conceptual participation can be a decisive element in offering generative possibilities of development. That is why my preference has been for semi-abstract, palimpsest-like work, like *becoming multiple*, that contains subliminal latent excess. It has greater freedom of choice, and greater uncertainty, due to an excess of information via the ground/figure catastrophic collapse.

¹⁴ The characteristic organization of perception into a figure that 'stands out' against an undifferentiated background, e.g. a printed word against a background page. What is figural at any one moment depends on patterns of sensory stimulation and on the momentary interests of the perceiver.

¹⁵ Aleatoricism is the incorporation of chance into the process of creation, especially the creation of art or media. The word derives from the Latin word *alea*, the rolling of dice.

¹⁶ Joseph Nechvatal, *Immersive Ideals / Critical Distances*, LAP Lambert Academic Publishing (2009) p. 56

This unseen/seen art concept owes something to Quentin Meillassoux's idea of *hyper-Chaos* that was sketched out in his book *After Finitude*: a form of absolutization where nothing is impossible or unthinkable.¹⁷ It must be grasped that hyper-Chaos is not just disorder, but that it also may produce order and stability, even little static worlds, as well as complete destruction of what is.

This potential of unseen/seen art aesthetics is embedded in the recognition of our sheer potentiality: all the selves we have within to develop or burn out. All the worlds we might create or destroy. Art shows us that we are more diverse than we had imagined; and more tolerant. It points out that what we have in common is a dangerous propensity for overrating our powers of comprehension.

But unseen/seen art aesthetics is hostile to generalizations. It is recalcitrant by design. It affirms with jubilation our state of varied mutability. That is my general standard of excellence for it. Its incomprehensibility by design connects us to our unconscious mind and inner feelings through what I think to be a type of chaos magic.¹⁸ Through a variety of techniques often reminiscent of Western ceremonial magic or indigenous shamanism, many practitioners of chaos magic believe they can change both their subjective experience and objective reality. Although there are a few techniques unique to chaos magic (such as some forms of sigil magic), chaos magic is often highly individualistic and borrows liberally from other belief systems. In this way, some chaos magicians consider their practice to be a meta-belief. But I consider it to be a phantasmagoric art of the unseen/seen.

As mentioned above, what is important in *becoming multiple* is its intentional unseen/seen enigma. It needs to be obscure to the degree that its codes cannot be discerned. This phantasmagorical obscurity and mystery is increasingly desirable in a world that has become increasingly data-mined, mapped, quantified, specialized and identified in a straight-forward matter of fact way.

Such aesthetic enigma is alluring when intelligible mining-type data processing is perceived as hollow, trite, and insensitive. Its goal is to disrupt instrumental logic and contradict, counteract, and cancel out false reason and hollow feeling.

Thus unseen/seen *becoming multiple* aesthetics suggests and produces stress in us; one might even say an urgent anxiety of disintegration. So dedication to its merits, if there are any, might well be described as vaguely heroic, because unseen/seen art aesthetics suggests the revelation of a plentiful nihilistic life force. Thus unseen/seen art aesthetics can be as creative as it is destructive. Or implies an endless struggle

¹⁷ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier, Continuum (2008) p. 64

¹⁸ Some common sources of inspiration for chaos magic include such diverse areas as science fiction, scientific theories, ceremonial magic, shamanism, Eastern philosophy, and individual experimentation.

between the two. In that sense it is a cul-de-sac of ill communication (vacuole)¹⁹ – the communication of enigma itself.

Joseph Nechvatal

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¹⁹ This is a reference to Gilles Deleuze's (1925-1995) notion of the vacuole. This concept of noncommunication comes from Deleuze's *Postscript on Control Societies*. Deleuze's notion of control is connected to information-communication technology—a concept he pulled out of the work of William S. Burroughs (1914-1997). A vacuole is like a sac in a cell's membrane, completely bound up inside the cell but also separate from it. Vacuoles play a significant role in autophagy, maintaining an *imbalance* between biogenesis (production) and *degradation* (or turnover) of many substances and cell structures. They also aid in the destruction of invading bacteria or of misfolded proteins that have begun to build up within the cell. The vacuole is a major part of the plant and animal cell. Nechvatal, Joseph. *Immersion Into Noise*. Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press (2011) p. 14